Rumblings of new war in the Middle East

Keith Jones
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Recent days have seen a spate of developments that point to the danger of a new military conflagration in the Middle East.

Israel has warned Syria that it will face an Israeli attack if Hezbollah, the Shiite-based Lebanese militia, fires Scud missiles at Israel, the London *Times* reported Sunday. The newspaper cites an unnamed Israeli cabinet minister as saying, "We'll return Syria to the Stone Age by crippling its power stations, ports, fuel storage and every bit of strategic infrastructure if Hezbollah dare to launch ballistic missiles against us".

Israel has accused Syria of supplying Hezbollah with medium-range Russian-made Scud missiles. Damascus has vigorously denied the charge, accusing Israel's hard-line government of using the Scud missile claim as a pretext for military action.

The *Times* article closely followed press reports that the Jordanian king, Abdullah II, had warned US congressional leaders in a closed-door meeting last Thursday that a Middle East war is imminent.

While Abdullah may have been the first Arab head of state to bring such warnings to Washington, there have been rumors and rumblings of a new Israeli war for months. Despite destroying the infrastructure of the southern half of Lebanon in 2006, killing more than a thousand civilians, Israel's month-long invasion failed in achieving its key objective—the destruction of Hezbollah as a serious military force.

Israel's anxiety and belligerence have been intensified by Washington's failure to limit and roll back Iran's growing influence in the region. In response to the American government's decades-long campaign to subvert and overthrow the Islamic Republic, Tehran has developed extensive ties to the Syrian regime and provides critical political and material support to Hezbollah and Hamas.

Senior figures in the Obama administration and Pentagon have responded to a *New York Times* report on a secret January memo from Defense Secretary Robert Gates by insisting that Washington is actively considering a full range of actions against Iran, including war.

According to the *Times*, Gates's secret three-page memo warned that the administration didn't have a long-term policy to deal with Iran in the event that Tehran continues to defy the US demand that it forego its rights under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to a full-cycle civilian nuclear energy program.

"The fact", said Obama's National Security Advisor General James Jones, "that we don't announce publicly our entire strategy for the world to see doesn't mean we don't have a strategy that anticipates the full range of contingencies—we do".

Gates and the White House have downplayed the significance of the January memo—the defense secretary claims that the *Times* misconstrued "its purpose and content"—and have denied the suggestion that the Obama administration is, or has been divided, over its Iran policy.

But there has been no denial of the *Times*' contention that Gates' memo was part of "an intensifying effort inside the Pentagon, the White House and the intelligence agencies to develop new options", including "a set of military alternatives…should diplomacy and sanctions fail to force Iran" to heel.

The *Times* report indicates that the Obama administration has accepted one of the key points Gates is said to have argued in his memo: the need for Washington to establish a bar or trigger for military action against Iran well short of Tehran actually developing a nuclear

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weapon. It cites a “senior administration official” as saying that the US would “ensure that Iran would not ‘acquire a nuclear capability’”.

Speaking at Columbia University Sunday, the chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, declared that the Pentagon was continuously planning for a military strike against Iran and stands ready to strike if that is the president’s “call”. But he warned, “striking” can “generate unintended consequences that are difficult to predict”. Later Mullen added, “If there was an easy answer, we would’ve picked it off the shelf”.

Mullen’s remarks speak to the strategic dilemma facing US imperialism.

Washington views the current Iranian regime as an intolerable obstacle to its strategic dominance of the Middle East, its drive to gain access to and control over oil-rich Central Asia, and its plans to strengthen its world position by shaping global energy flows.

During the past decade, Washington has ratcheted up its pressure against Iran—through the invasions and occupations of the neighboring states of Iraq and Afghanistan, through a program of economic sanctions, and by lending support to opposition groups, from Balochi nationalist terrorists to the bourgeois opposition Green movement.

In the final years of the Bush administration, the US political and military-security establishment engaged in an acrimonious debate as to whether to attack Iran.

What has thus far stayed the hand of the Obama administration—which has continued the war in Iraq, dramatically expanded the “AfPak” War, and in its recent nuclear weapons strategy statement refused to exclude using nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear Iran—is the recognition that there can be no successful “surgical strike” against Iran.

The Iranian regime—given the country’s size, strategic location, and its international allies—has the potential to seriously damage the US and its client regimes and disrupt Persian Gulf oil exports, thereby delivering a body blow to the world economy.

Virtually nothing is said of this publicly. But the strategists of US imperialism recognize a war with Iran could ignite a military-political firestorm that would engulf the entire region, from Afghanistan and Iraq to Israel-Palestine—a conflict that in its size and scope could be the largest since at least the Korean War.

To limit this potential, a US strike against Iran would from the outset have to take the form of a “shock and awe” campaign aiming at destroying Iran’s infrastructure and ability to function as a modern state.

Washington’s launch of such a war would invariably have an explosive impact on world geopolitics, on the relations of the US with all the other great powers, and on class relations in the US. Russia and China, in particular, would in all likelihood see such a war, directed as it would be in ensuring US control over the world’s principal oil-exporting region and projecting US power into Eurasia, as constituting a fundamental threat to their strategic interests.

By the same token, however, the US cannot retreat from the drive to assert its domination over the Middle East. If this was imperative in the decades after World War II when the position of American capitalism was unchallenged, it is all the more so now that its world position has been so demonstrably undermined.

Thus the White House and Pentagon continue to prepare for “all contingencies” and invoke these war plans to strong-arm the other great powers into supporting yet another round of punishing sanctions against Tehran.

Whatever its particular form, a new Middle East war would have catastrophic consequences for the people of the Middle East—Iranian, Arab, and Jewish—and potentially the world.

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